Beyond Moses to The Messiah

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Galatians and the Sabbath

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The non-Sabbath (Saturday)-keeper is often puzzled by claims that Paul must have believed in and taught the Sabbath and holy days to his Gentile converts. Colossians 2:16, 17 (apart from attempts at retranslation) looks like a plain downgrading of the importance of all the Old Testament sacred days, the shadows being replaced by Christ, the reflection contrasted with the thing itself. Paul in fact refers to the whole sabbatical system, "a festival, or a new moon or a Sabbath," as a single shadow. "These things," he says, "are a shadow of things to come." Paul makes not the slightest distinction among these three types of observance. It would be therefore contrary to the plain words of Paul to say that he is not speaking of the weekly Sabbath, but only of monthly and annual observances. No one could possibly read Paul to mean that "an (annual) festival, new moon and an (annual) festival" comprise a downgraded shadow, but the weekly Sabbath is still fully in force. He did not repeat himself by speaking of the same "annual festivals" twice! Paul's statement clearly and obviously embraces all three types of holy day.

Mandatory Sabbath-keeping seems to contradict a whole book — the book of Galatians. The essence of Paul's argument must be grasped by reading the book as a whole. There is no question that the Sinai law-giving (which includes the Decalogue) is here viewed negatively by the Apostle.

Paul is agitated that the Galatians have moved "to another Gospel" (1:6-9). Christ has delivered us out of the present evil system, yet the Galatians want to go back to it. The threat is from a Jewish quarter (Titus was not compelled to be circumcised, 2:3). The Jewish believers wanted to enslave their fellow Christians (2:4). They were trying to make the Christians Judaize (2:14), that is, to seek salvation in the works of the law. It is plain that Paul sees being under the law as "continuing in all the things written in the book of law" (3:10). The covenant made through Moses is temporary (3:23-29). However, it certainly does not set aside the promises to Abraham.

The whole point of the Christian covenant is that it confirms the Abrahamic promises and makes believers in Messiah heirs to the very promises of the Messiah and the land made to Abraham (3:29).

Some Sabbath-keepers avoid the difficulty of Paul's sweeping statements about the law by suggesting that he is referring to the sacrificial law only. But they must first show that it would be possible for a Gentile to offer sacrifices in Galatia! To tell Gentiles they need not offer sacrifices would be irrelevant. The law in question, however, is the law associated with the Mount Sinai covenant (4:24) which leads to slavery. This law is described as a "trainer" to bring us to Christ. But now that Christ has come we are no longer under the trainer (3:25). It is to be noticed that the trainer is not the penalty of the law but the law itself, the whole Sinai system.

To be under the trainer is to be under the elementary principles of the world, and enslaved to them (4:3). But Christ came to redeem us from this slavery to law (4:5), so that we are no longer under the trainer (3:25). We Jews and Gentiles were enslaved to elementary principles (4:3) and now you Gentiles are wishing to return to elementary principles (under the threat of Judaism from Jewish believers): "You observe days, months, years and seasons" (4:10). "Tell me, you who wish to be under the law, do you not hear what the law says?" (4:21) The Mount Sinai covenant leads to slavery. Don't be entangled with a yoke of slavery (5:1). "If you are circumcised, you must keep the whole law" (5:3). The "wishing to serve the elementary principles" (4:9) is evidently parallel to "wishing to be under the law" (4:21). It is hardly sensible to say that the Judaizers were urging them to come under the penalty of the law. They were urging them to come under the whole Sinai system. That system is the law "in the letter" and not the New Covenant Christian law in the spirit.

There is a simple pattern of thought here: The service of elementary principles means being under the law, and the service of elementary principles involves the observation of days, etc. How could the observation of pagan days be described as wanting to be "under the law" (4:21), "slavery to Mount Sinai"? The children of the Sinai system are at present enslaved (4:25). The contrast is between two Jerusalems, not between Jerusalem and Babylon.

Therefore, says Paul, don't be entangled with the slavery of Mount Sinai. Circumcision will mean the need for obedience to the whole system. Faith and love are all that is required (5:6). Those belonging to this system are the new Israel as opposed to the old Israel (6:16). The Church is the Israel of God as the new international people of faith in the Messiah. Paul blesses them, i.e. those in Galatia and the wider Church, the Israel of God. In I Corinthians 10:18 he distinguished ethnic Israel from the spiritual Israel of God (Gal. 6:16) by calling the former "the Israel of the flesh." The international Church however consists of those who are "the true circumcision [i.e. 'Jews'] who worship God in the spirit and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3).

It may well be asked why Paul takes such a negative view of the law here, and in Romans a much more positive one. The answer lies in the different circumstances and problems of the believers in Rome and Galatia. In Rome he wrote to Jews and Gentiles. He accommodates both elements by sometimes using the word law in a special sense. The Gentiles, he says, sometimes perform the law by nature (Rom. 2:14) though they do not have the law. It is clear

that that law did not include Sabbath-keeping. No Gentile is a Sabbath-keeper by nature. Yet the Gentiles are able to show that the law is written on their hearts (Rom. 2:15). The uncircumcision who keep the law by nature will judge the circumcised who do not keep it (Rom. 2:27). Paul has here a definition of law which is not the law which includes Jewish holidays, as John the Apostle calls them in his gospel (5:1; 6:4; 7:2). In Romans, Paul urges tolerance between those who "observe one day above others to the Lord," and those who do not (Rom. 14:5). The question of meat versus vegetarianism is a separate though related issue (Rom. 14:2). These are matters of conscience. The eating of vegetables is not directly related to the observance of days. Can anyone show that vegetables, as opposed to meat, were eaten on special days?

Some Sabbath-keepers are admirably consistent in insisting that holy days and new moons should be observed. It is clear from Colossians 2:16 that days, months and annual festivals have equal status in Paul's mind. All therefore must be observed. Amos 8:5 suggests that all trade and work in the field ought to be discontinued on the new moon, and Isaiah 66:23 implies that the new
moon is a day for worship like the Sabbath.

Sabbath-keeping can of course be argued with certainty from the Old Testament. But the observance of days has been "spiritualized" in the New Testament. Everyone admits some spiritualizing in the New Testament. Old Testament circumcision was barely recognizable in its spiritualized New Testament form. Who would immediately discern the link between cutting the foreskin and an attitude of mind? While physical circumcision in Genesis 17 is an absolute requirement for membership in the covenant people, Jews and strangers, it has become a matter of indifference in the New Covenant. That is a huge change.

Matthew hints at the spiritualizing of the Sabbath as he records Jesus saying that the priests could break the Sabbath and be blameless (Matt. 12:5-6). The priests who innocently broke the Sabbath, that is, they were not bound by the Sabbath when they worked in the tabernacle or temple, are a "type" of the new priesthood of all believers. David and his colleagues also broke the Old Testament law by eating the showbread. But their conduct was a justifiable "type" of the New Covenant freedom from the law (Matt. 12:4).

Christ had offered "rest" to those who came to him (Matt. 11:28-30). Would not this be a permanent rather than a weekly Sabbath? The distinctive feature of the fourth commandment is that it can only be broken one day a week. All the other commandments are binding every day. Paul points to the spiritualizing of the Passover: the annual days of unleavened bread are now equivalent to the permanent use of the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (I Cor. 5:8). "Sincerity and truth" are required every day of the week. That's what it means to "be keeping the festival" (I Cor. 5:8). The verb here has a present progressive sense: we are to be keeping the feast continuously.

Polycarp was directly instructed by the Apostle John. He died as a martyr at the age of 86. His pupil Irenaeus knows nothing of Sabbath observance. If John had taught Polycarp the Sabbath commandment he failed dismally to impress its importance on his pupil. This would not be a conclusive argument against Sabbath-keeping, but it is hard to see how the book of Galatians is not. If Paul was not trying to show that the Mosaic legal system enacted at Sinai was superseded by a higher form of law in Christ, what was he trying to show?

It is not unusual for Sabbath-keepers to admit that they do not understand what Paul meant in Colossians 2:16. Various retranslations have been attempted but they destroy the obvious contrast which Paul makes between shadow (Sabbaths) and body (Christ). The book of Galatians must also be explained by Sabbath-keepers in full view of the fact that Paul cannot have been speaking of sacrifices. The Mount Sinai code (Galatians ch. 4) was not primarily to do with sacrifices, nor was offering sacrifices possible for Gentiles in Galatians. Then what law is Paul against? Since he obviously did not consider the food laws to be still in force (Rom. 14:20, 14: "all things are clean…nothing is unclean"), isn't it clear that he treats the observance of days in the same way?

It is beyond question that he dismisses the obligation to keep some law. What law is this?

Jesus "has abolished the law of commandments contained in ordinances" (see Eph 2:15). Sabbath-keepers must give a sensible and plausible explanation of this text and the whole book of Galatians, if they are to convince their friends that Sabbath-breaking is tantamount to breaking all the laws of God. Finally, Romans 14:5 must be shown to be consistent with the need for a weekly Sabbath observance as an essential part of the faith.

The fact is that Paul is against law in an Old Covenant sense as the source of our salvation. The source of our salvation is "Jesus Christ faith" — faith in Jesus and the faith of Jesus, imitating his example as a bearer of the Gospel of the Kingdom, and obeying his Kingdom Gospel (Mark 1:14, 15; 4:11, 12; Luke 4:43). The essence of New Testament faith is belief in the promises made to Abraham (Rom. 4), as taught by Jesus and the Apostles. The power to follow Jesus' example and to believe as Abraham believed is supplied by the spirit which orientates salvation in a new direction. The fruits of the spirit are derived from believing in the Gospel Message as Jesus preached it, namely the Gospel of the Kingdom (see Matt. 13:19; Luke 8:12). "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by Messiah's message" (Rom. 10:17).

If you are in any doubt about the issue of clean and unclean meats or the Sabbath, please consider carefully the words of Paul in Romans 14:14, 20: "I [Paul, the Jew] know that nothing is unclean in itself, but to him who thinks it is unclean, to him it is unclean…All things are clean." Paul uses the exact opposite of the word found in Leviticus 11 which describes some foods as unclean (akathartos). He states that "all things are clean [katharos]." Can Paul possibly have been enforcing the food laws of Leviticus 11? It is clear that he is not interested in those Mosaic laws. In Galatians 3:19, 24, 25 he expressly states that the law of Moses "was added until the seed [Christ] came…The law was our custodial supervisor to

bring us to Christ…but after faith has come we are no longer under a custodian/law." To insist on the law of Moses under the New Covenant is to contradict Paul and Jesus who inspired him.

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